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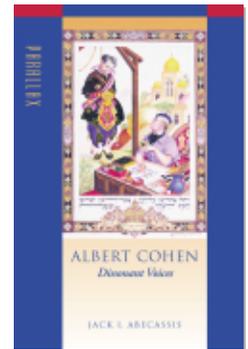
Albert Cohen

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Albert Cohen: Dissonant Voices.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

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Epilogue: *Ézéchiel, or Abject Origins, Suicidal Destiny*

*So nothing is as sweet as a man's own country,
his own parents, even though he's settled down
in some luxurious house, off in a foreign land
and far from those who bore him.*

*No more. Come,
let me tell you about the voyage fraught with hardship
Zeus inflicted on me, homeward bound from Troy . . .*

Homer, *The Odyssey* 9.38–43

No book on Cohen should begin nor conclude without a reflection on his paradoxical status in our contemporary literary consciousness. The question of why, particularly in academia, Cohen is *known* but not *read*, and when read, then most often misread, has motivated virtually all aspects of this book. Dissonance has been the musical analogy used to describe the discomfort that the reader experiences while reading Cohen, for he strikes certain familiar notes but rarely returns to the expected and comforting keys. He therefore leaves the reader suspended in a foreign space, estranged as in a nightmare.

What I propose by way of conclusion is an explicit reflection on the reasons for Cohen's marginality. But I would like this conclusion to be as concrete as possible, lest the Sirens of abstraction dilute Cohen's searing dissonance and lure us away again from the harshness of his disruptive texts into the soft anesthesia of historicism and theory where allegories and analogies drowned in the ether of "contextual relativism" allow the reader to smartly resist and repress the unthinkable. Cohen offers us this very experience of total dissonance and even repulsion in his 1932 play *Ézéchiel*—his most controversial piece, the subject of much painful and repeated public reprobation. In the economy of a one-act, two-man play, Cohen distills his ambivalence and darkest nightmares in crisp expression. But most critically, the brevity and theatrical nature of the piece make it impossible for the audience to circumvent the meaning of these nightmares. No wonder, then, that *Ézéchiel* resulted in an open confrontation between an unusually aggressive Cohen and spectators of the play in 1933, some of whom defensively attacked the author by sarcastically identifying him as none

other than the new German chancellor Adolf Hitler, using “the pseudonym of Albert Cohen.” These spectators could no longer afford to tiptoe around the burning coals Cohen flung at them. They had to engage the spectacle, respond to Cohen, or withdraw in silence, ashamed or satisfied, depending on their perspective. A critical reading of this play in terms of the dynamics of Cohen’s œuvre as a whole, and with the circumstances of its performance in Paris in the early 1930s in mind, would be a lacerating experience—a reading of a Jew’s pathological self-hatred, hysterical rage, and bitter resentment. Yet we shall never understand the problem of Cohen’s literary reception without fleshing out *Ézéchiel*, this taboo play about an abject father, whose ghost haunted Cohen throughout his life.

Ézéchiel is not a minor product of circumstances. First published in the *Palestine-Nouvelle revue juive* (1930), it won the *Comoedia* one-act competition and was first performed at the théâtre de l’Odéon on April 1, 1931. In May and June 1933, the Comédie-Française included a second version of *Ézéchiel* in a program of five one-act plays. But between the first performance at the Odéon in 1931 and the performances at the Comédie-Française in the spring of 1933, the atmosphere in Paris had soured, and many Jews and anti-Semites alike reacted virulently. The stinging rebukes *Ézéchiel* received remained with Cohen his entire life. Seventeen years later, when he was writing the final version of *Le Livre de ma mère* (1950–53), he also rewrote its complement, *Ézéchiel* (which could easily be retitled “The Book of My Father”), and this third version of the play was published by Gallimard in 1956. That same year, Cohen gave the Comédie des Champs-Élysées permission to stage the play, and again, to Cohen’s dismay and ongoing frustration, the same open reprobation ensued. Again the play was subject to a de facto boycott by the Jewish establishment. From then on, Cohen no longer authorized any public performance of the play. Since his death in 1982, the play has been performed sporadically, no doubt as a kind of oddity. More significantly, besides the biographical and bibliographical treatments, the existing criticism on Albert Cohen is all but silent on the subject of *Ézéchiel*, with not a single article or book chapter devoted to it. This play is too unsettling, too abject to be allegorized and intertextualized with the usual fare of Stendhal and Tolstoy! Here the intertextual dismays: *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Édouard Drumont’s *La France juive* (1886). And yet Cohen, who reworked this play at least three times between 1927 and 1956, considered it a major work, a significant statement of who he was (not) and what he was (not).

So let us plunge into this theatrical, father-centered nightmare, from which we shall emerge capable of accounting for Cohen’s relative marginality in canonical French and Jewish literature.

The action of the play unfolds on the island of Cephalonia, in the house of Ézéchiél, a rich banker who is the leader of the local Jewish community and the father of Solal, Britain's chancellor of the Exchequer (minister of finance). The stage set is claustrophobic. Ézéchiél's house is one of those psychotic, paranoid spaces of closure in Cohen's writing, of which the basement of the Château Saint-Germain in *Solal* (see Chapter 3) and Rachel's Berlin cellar in *Belle du Seigneur* (see Chapter 5) are telling examples. Cohen's prefatory notes on the décor are categorical about its pathological nature:

Very low ceiling. White walls. A door in the foreground and to the left. In the background, to the left and in a separate section, the front door round at the top. The double doors are covered with metal fittings and enormous bolts. Gigantic lock and deadbolt. Above the door, a large inscription in Hebrew letters. To the right and pretty high, a small window round at the top. In the front plane and to the right, a table, a cathedra [a thronelike chair], and a stool. These pieces of furniture are massive. On the table an old Bible, a big chandelier with seven candles, an ink pot in which rests a goose quill, a glass ewer, a round loaf of bread, a knife, the portrait of Ézéchiél's son.*

But the spectator's eye would immediately be riveted on the center rear of the stage, where

an old safe [*coffre-fort*], gigantic, monstrous, looms like a fortress. It is covered with large bolts, which are like the warts of a monster. Heavy chains riveted to the walls and to the ceiling keep the safe captive. These chains, the safe's enormous tentacles, two of which cross the room lengthwise and heightwise, are the main decorative elements of this sad house. Three steps lead to the safe, which is like an immense spider, whose chains would be its feet. The safe and all the pieces of furniture are black.†

*Plafond très bas. Murs blancs. Une porte au premier plan et à gauche. Au fond, à gauche et en pan coupé, la porte d'entrée, dont la partie supérieure est arrondie. Les deux battants de la porte sont bardés de ferrures et d'énormes boulons. Serrure et verrou gigantesques. Au-dessus de la porte, une grande inscription en caractères hébraïques. À droite, et assez haut, une petite fenêtre dont la partie supérieure est arrondie. Au premier plan et à droite, une table, une cathédre et un tabouret. Ces meubles sont massifs. Sur la table, une vieille Bible, un grand chandelier à sept branches, un encrier dans lequel est trempée une plume d'oie, un broc en verre, un pain rond, un poignard, le portrait du fils d'Ézéchiél. (*Ézéchiél*, 781)

†un vieux coffre-fort, gigantesque, monstrueux, dominateur comme une forteresse. Il est bardé de gros boulons qui sont comme les verrues du monstre. De lourdes chaînes rivées aux murs et au plafond le maintiennent captif. Ces chaînes, énormes tentacules du coffre, et dont deux traversent la pièce dans sa longueur et dans sa hauteur, sont le principal élément décoratif de cette triste demeure. Trois marches conduisent au coffre qui est comme une immense araignée dont les chaînes seraient les pattes. Le coffre et tous les meubles sont noirs. (*Ézéchiél*, 781)

This safe, where Ézéchiél keeps all of his capital, represents the totality of Ézéchiél's being *in reductio*: it is most obviously the typical representation of a paranoid miser's home, somewhat like Shylock's home, although very different from the home of Molière's miser, Harpagon, in that the *cassette*, or safe, is not ashamedly hidden in the garden but dominates the interior of the house. In other words, the safe here is not a matter for shame and taboo but, on the contrary, set on a pedestal as a ritual fetish; the sacred altar of the house, the holy of holies. Furthermore, tentaclelike ropes secure and choke the safe in all directions, making the safe the prisoner of the suffocating room and, by analogy, Ézéchiél a prisoner of his own safe, prisoner of his money psychosis. He is thus much more than a mere miser in the classical Plautian tradition who just happens to belong to the Jewish nation. Rather, the suffocating room, the safe, and above all the ropes, represent, according to Cohen, the essence of the Jewish condition—that of being the proud prisoners of an insane project: on the one hand, the negation of nature, which is the rule of force over the ethical, the total negation of paganism, in short; and, on the other hand, the need to accumulate wealth as a response and an antidote to a history of persecution. Thus from the “natural,” pagan point of view, the Jew is twice deformed. This is why Cohen's emphatic décor descriptions are laden with such overdetermined symbolism. No doubt can be entertained as to the meaning of the stage décor. This play is not going to be an exercise in subtlety.

To prepare his evening prayer, Ézéchiél opens the locked doors of the safe, as a Jew would open the holy of holies in the synagogue, and prays facing it as if it contained the Torah scrolls, instead of placing himself closest to the east-facing wall as required by Jewish custom. Ézéchiél translates the pathological fetishism of money into flagrant idolatry and his relationship to God into a form of oriental bazaar quid pro quo: “O powerful [father] of Jacob, I present to You the two million gold drachmas with which it pleased You to bless my commercial and financial ventures. Bestow long life and fecundity upon these two million so that they may praise You and pay tribute to Your power, O Landlord of the world.”* To pray is to bargain for earthly things. Worse, to pray is to allow money the honor and agency of praising God. Money is not an abstract means of exchange, a guarantor of survival for a persecuted minority—no, it acquires a voice of its own. And thus Ézéchiél opens the safe, dons the prayer shawl, and begins to sway in prayer. Stage, décor, gestures, and

*Ô puissant de Jacob, je Te présente les deux millions de drachmes-or dont il T'a plu de bénir mes entreprises commerciales et financières. Accorde longue vie et fécondité à ces deux millions afin qu'ils Te louent et qu'ils rendent hommage à Ta puissance, ô Propriétaire du monde. (*Ézéchiél*, 783)

opening monologue reveal the truth about this deranged miser even before a single dialogue ensues. We see all of this before and during the prefatory monologue. The subsequent dialogues and dramatic developments seem superfluous; the meaning of the silent but all too eloquent stage montage overdetermines the meaning of what follows.

The two main characters make their entrances separately, and each is assigned an expository monologue. Ézéchiél is dressed in his best attire for his son's arrival: black velvet frock coat lined with gray fur, black boots, a fur hat, and a silver chain, at the end of which hangs the enormous key to his safe. His initial interior monologue is like a collage of Jewish miser jokes. "Seven candles," he begins, "thirty cents a piece, that adds up to exactly two drachmas and ten cents. Two drachmas and ten cents, at a reasonable interest rate of five percent, after a ten-year period, yield exactly interest of sixty-three cents. A candelabra with three branches would have done just as well. These candelabras with seven branches are wasteful and are consequently the ruin of the chosen people."* Ézéchiél then laments aloud (echoing Molière's Harpagon shouting in panic, "Où est ma cassette?") "Who stole my thirty-seven matches? Zacharie! . . . Zacharie, where are my thirty-seven matches? Where are my thirty-seven matches? . . . Zacharie! Zacharie!"† And when he finds them, he splits them lengthwise for the sake of economy. Later we learn that cooling by way of ventilation for Ézéchiél means hard work: he sways and rotates himself in front of the fan, lest the fan actually be used and thus possibly damaged. After two minutes of the play, the spectators know that Ézéchiél is miserly, paranoid, hypocritical, and, above all, sacrilegious to the core.

Jérémie, a poor, uncouth, itinerant Eastern European Jew, with a short red beard, dressed in tattered Levite garb, an old suitcase in one hand, and a broken handcuff around one wrist, then enters, accompanied by a small dog named Titus. He is, in sum, the very character that Solal pretends to be in the macabre Purim play in the opening scene of *Belle du Seigneur* where Solal tries to seduce Ariane. The square suitcase, held together by ropes and complicated knots, covered in stickers reading: "*Emigrant. To be Disinfected. To be turned*

*Sept chandelles, à trente centimes l'une, cela fait exactement deux drachmes et dix centimes. Deux drachmes et dix centimes, au taux raisonnable de cinq pour cent, produisent exactement, au bout d'une période de dix années, un intérêt de soixante-trois centimes. Un chandelier à trois branches élit tout aussi bien fait l'affaire. Ces chandeliers à sept branches sont dispendieux et sont en conséquence la ruine du peuple élu. (*Ézéchiél*, 783)

†Qui m'a volé mes trente-sept allumettes? Zacharie! . . . Zacharie, où sont mes trente-sept allumettes? Où sont mes trente-sept allumettes? . . . Zacharie! Zacharie! (*Ézéchiél*, 784)

back. *Undesirable. Fourth class.*”^{*} And handwritten in big letters: “*International Bank. Marriages. Open at Night.*”[†] Alongside the eloquent chained safe, this roped suitcase completes the stage décor: they represent two versions of essentially the same exilic Judaism in its full bipolarity. Opulent or destitute, self-confident or paranoid, in command or marginal, Ézéchiél and Jérémie are essentially the same character in different guises. From a secular European point of view, the immaculate velvet frock coat of the one is symbolically identical to the tattered Levite dress of the other. And whether they carry a suitcase around desolate train stations or are imprisoned in a prosperous house for the sake of a safe, both are symbolically chained to insanity, a perpetual insecurity, a symbolic pariah state; both “international bankers” are insane and repulsive, although Jérémie, Solal’s surrogate, possesses a lucidity that Ézéchiél’s utter narcissism, paranoia, and fetishism preclude. “No, Master Ézéchiél, [Judaism] is not a religion, it’s a catastrophe.”[‡] “But it is a beautiful catastrophe,”[§] Jérémie adds in a burlesque scene in *Mangeclous*.¹

The plot is simple. Ézéchiél is awaiting the arrival of his illustrious son from England. But Solal has died aboard ship the day before. Daunted by the prospect of announcing such terrible news to the patriarch of their community, the Cephalonian Jews entrust this mission to Jérémie, who charges them five drachmas to execute the dreadful task. Upon meeting Jérémie in his living room, the rich Sephardic banker has nothing but contempt for his poor Eastern European coreligionist. Yet Jérémie is himself incapable of abruptly announcing Solal’s death. And so ensues a comic scene that is all about delaying the inevitable, during which Cohen draws on his usual bag of tricks. Jérémie introduces himself as a banker, attempts to talk Ézéchiél first into buying an option to build a bridge in Turkey, and then into investing in a scheme to run tubes through every house in Argentina so as to provide a continuous distribution of café-au-lait to each and every home at any hour of the day. Finally, as a last resort, he pulls out a fake ruby ring and haggles with Ézéchiél about its quality and price. Time flies, the boat that has unloaded Solal’s body now leaves the harbor, as indicated by a blowing of its fog horns, and Jérémie finally carries out his charge and informs the old patriarch that his son is dead. Ézéchiél is at first apparently shattered by Solal’s death, but he quickly recovers. He then asks Jérémie whether his daughter is fertile and decides to marry

^{*}*Émigrant. À désinfecter. À refouler. Indésirable. Quatrième classe.* (Ézéchiél, 780; emphasis in original)

[†]*Banque internationale. Mariages. Ouvert la nuit.* (Ézéchiél, 780; emphasis in original)

[‡]*Non, seigneur Ézéchiél, ce n’est pas une religion, c’est une catastrophe. (Ézéchiél, 788)

[§]C’est ine [*sic*] catastrophe mais belle (Mangeclous, 548)

her himself the next day so that he can sire another son. He decides to name the future son David and wishes him not only to be more politically and financially important than the British chancellor of the Exchequer but also the Messiah in person. As the play ends, *Ézéchiél* orders his Greek notary to contact members of the extended Solal clan in Brussels, Zurich, and New York to place limit orders for shares in the Union minière du Haut Katanga, Nestlé, and Dupont. "Without commission, of course."*

We are now positioned to account for the driving force behind this theatrical performance in terms of the repetitive montages that Cohen broods over. The saga of Solal begins on Cephalonia in *Solal* with the bar mitzvah of metaphysical estrangement, Solal's revolt against his father and flight from the island to urban Europe, and ends in *Ézéchiél* with his return to the island and to his father. We have come full circle, or just about, since it is only a cadaver that actually returns home. Solal dies en route.

The most obvious aspect of this play is an absence. This is Cohen's only fiction or essay where the fictional Solal or the autobiographical "I" is absent. The wandering son, now British chancellor of the Exchequer, does not live to see father, hearth, community again.² He will not be the prodigal son. Only his corpse arrives. Yet we are told nothing about the surprising death of this vigorous young man on board a modern ocean liner. However, we are by now quite familiar with Solal's perennial urge to commit suicide; and we can conclude that Samson Solal, just like Solal in *Belle du Seigneur*, kills himself. Suicide, rather than the eternal wandering of Abraham, the glorious return of the prodigal son, or the cunning return of Odysseus, is the true Cohenian destiny. *Ézéchiél* is an odyssey with no return; or, alternatively, the story of return as a suicide.

For Solal, the nothingness of death is preferable to facing the father. No reconciliation is possible between this vile father and his suave son. This is another variation on the complete exhaustion of the Joseph narrative. Solal will not be the "augment," the hidden leavening that will exist apart from the tribe, estranged from the father, and yet who will guarantee their survival by his skill, intelligence, and cunning. Unlike Joseph, who is ultimately reconciled with Jacob, his brothers, and their kin, all while remaining apart from them, Solal opts for death.

Solal cannot inhabit the paternal space, cannot identify with it under *any* circumstances. The staging and gestures, in their grotesque overdetermination, make that clear. Having analyzed Cohen's nightmares—the underground of

*Sans courtage, bien entendu (*Ézéchiél*, 803)

Château Saint-Germain, Berlin, the Rosenfelds (Chapters 3 and 5)—we read these scenes as symbols of Solal's searing ambivalence about Jews, that is, about himself: he repeatedly identifies with Jews in the abstract and rejects them in the concrete. The subterranean spaces are reserved for those others who are the same as, but essentially different from, Solal, whether they be the paternal Rabbi Gamaliel hidden in Château Saint-Germain or the dwarf Rachel burrowing about in Berlin, infected with multiple deliria of grandeur. These images of an insane subterranean vermin constitute the most negative pole in Cohen's dialectics, in his desire to "show the glory of Israel to those who see only Jews." These moments of visceral denigration make the serious transmission of Cohen's literary works extremely difficult.

Proud and narcissistic, the father seeks to mirror himself in the splendor of his son's worldly success. This is why Ézéchiél does not go to the harbor to greet his son: he does not want their encounter to be diluted by the crowd. He looks forward to an intimate scene of return as the crowning experience of his life. The contemptuous son, however, refuses to raise such a mirror to his father's face. Instead, Jérémie, Cohen's favorite grotesque surrogate, first tortures the father. This surrogate then carries out his commission and delivers the son, or in his absence, the son's death certificate. Solal's message through the surrogate is the following: "A certified death; my death, which redeems my impossible presence before you in your house."

There is, however, something very surprising in Cohen's decision to employ Jérémie as a surrogate for the dead Solal. This scenario is weak in comparison with Cohen's more spectacular and very effective scenarios where he disguises Solal as Jérémie. Although colorful and moving, Jérémie cannot but be a stiff character, a clown of sorts, hemmed in by his real limitations. But Solal-cum-Jérémie bristles with comic potential, and especially on the comic stage. It is Cohen's favorite Purim play, his most striking self-dramatization. Think of the first scene of *Belle du Seigneur*, where Solal-cum-Jérémie conducts the famous moral experiment on Ariane. Think of all the times Solal disguises himself as a Jérémie just to be mocked in the streets (the Christological phantasm of being a mocked king), including the crucial Berlin episode, where the undersecretary-general of the League of Nations disguises himself as a Jérémie and almost actually satisfies his suicidal wish to be martyred by the Nazis. And think of all the episodes where Solal pulls his Eastern European Hassidic costume out of a suitcase (in which he also keeps his favorite anti-Semitic tracts) in the privacy of his hotel room and gazes at himself in the mirror, gesticulating like a pious Jew. One often has the impression that whenever Solal looks into a mirror, he

sees a dissonant double image of himself as both virile master of the world (Joseph) and itinerant Jewish clown (Jérémie). So the absence of Cohen's signature baroque Purim play in *Ézéchiel* raises the question: Why does the presence of the father exclude his son's favorite *mise-en-scène*?

The answer is rather obvious. When a mask is worn, it can be removed. When, on the other hand, a character dies, he cannot be revived (at least in realistic fiction). In other words, the cadaver and its surrogate render impossible the father-son encounter. It will not happen, come what may. Had Solal only disguised himself (as he does with the Valorous, Jérémie, Ariane, and countless other strangers), the mask would have acted as a catalyst for further dramatic development. The mask always comes off and the real encounter takes place—which is precisely what cannot take place with this father. Solal does meet the Valorous in the Joseph/Purim play in which he performs the role of a “*monstre à tete de gaze*” and then recognizes and reconciles with them; and with Ariane, once the Jérémie mask comes off, the real encounter takes place. To mask oneself, as Solal does, is to play a *Fort! Da!* game of now I have it, now I don't. Death, life; rejection, recognition; cruelty, generosity. Again, this is Cohen's signature topos, so rich in dramatic and existential possibilities. But in Cohen's scheme this British minister, Samson Solal, prefers death to a reunion and therefore a surrogate is sent, a burlesque caricature, to represent Solal, as a final and macabre poisoned gift to an impossible father for an impossible encounter. *Ézéchiel* is short-circuited from the beginning; the play has no dramatic potential except that of admitting the cruel truth, and making a spectacle of it at the Comédie-Française to boot.

As noted, both *Ézéchiel* and *Le Livre de ma mère* were rewritten concurrently in the early 1950s. In both cases, the portrayal of Cohen's parents is fraught with wishes for their death. While the death wish with respect to the mother is veiled by moments of sincere tenderness and remorse, the aggression toward the father is almost unmediated. Cohen puts his mother on a death train; and in *Ézéchiel*, his own corpse is disembarked: death instead of return and reconciliation. Unable to kill his father, even symbolically, he takes his revenge by killing himself. The mourning process that is so rich in literary potential does not take place in the play *Ézéchiel*. The deep ambivalence so evident in the case of the mother is simply absent here.³ Instead of the affective and poetic charge, whose deepest source is found in the ambivalence about the people we mourn, Cohen employs *Ézéchiel* as the repository of the vilest stereotypes concerning the Jews, as well as the apologist for these character deformations: “My money, yes. Our money, our old ally which is there (*he points*

toward the safe) in this fortress, in our fortress. Our money that has permitted us to remain a strong people, that has permitted us to resist, to wait, to be patient, that has permitted us to endure despite our persecutors, that has permitted us to have contempt for their contempt!"* In the end, however, this combination of stereotype and platitude is sterile, which explains why *Le Livre de ma mère* is the best-loved of Cohen's writings and *Ézéchiel* the most neglected. Yet despite all these differences, the core dynamic remains the same. Writing about his father or his mother brings on another scenario of self-execution, whether through entombing oneself in writing about death, as in the case of the mother, or through absence by suicide and surrogacy, as in the case of the father.

In this brief analysis of *Ézéchiel*, we have revisited many of the arguments of the present book. For those familiar with Cohen's recurrent montage, *Ézéchiel* offers an incomparable advantage over all his other texts. Because of its brevity and theatrical nature, the signal is exceptionally clear. Absent the usual background noise, the essential elements of the Cohenian montage come through all the more explicitly. Here the Alexandrian alibis of comforting intertextuality, analogy, and allegory are missing entirely. Here there is no escape to Stendhalian narratives; no bored Madame Bovary, no passionate Anna Karenina, no Proustian bisexuality and jealousy; no Joycian self-consciousness to hold us up, to buffer the assault of Solal's nightmares. Here, in this one-act play, there is no hiding in the inner folds of a richly polyphonic novel, where many wrinkles and devices may satisfy our desire to elude acknowledging what is at stake. No, here the spectator who has just stepped into the Comédie-Française to see five short plays must witness Cohen's most masochistic vision: abject origins, suicidal destiny, the son absenting himself from the presence of a father impossible to love.

The spectator must have had the feeling of being trapped: theater has the ability to force a confrontation with a real, concrete representation, which you must view with others, in a given place and at a given time, all your escape routes blocked. You are in front of the massive safe and the tattered suitcase, both props held fast by snakelike chains and ropes: the Medusa's head of Judaism that reduces Solal to yet another *mise-en-scène* of his own death. In the darkness of the theater, you must experience *Ézéchiel* and Jérémie as real beings; your nervous system intermingles with theirs; your imagination with

*Mon argent, oui. Notre argent, notre vieil allié qui est là (*il montre le coffre-fort*) dans cette forteresse, dans notre forteresse. Notre argent qui nous a permis de rester un peuple fort, qui nous a permis de résister, d'attendre, de patienter, qui nous a permis de durer malgré nos persécuteurs, qui nous a permis de mépriser leur mépris! (*Ézéchiel*, 799)

their deliria. You, like Cohen, become the sadistic spectator, to your delight or horror, or both. Cohen forces you to experience *Ézéchiel* exactly as he experiences Judaism in his darkest moments, with this searing admixture of visceral repulsion and historical pride. This is, of course, the inner theater of Cohen the poet and not that of Cohen the diplomat, the tireless public militant of Jewish causes. But staging this private nightmare in the agora of French cultural life—the Comédie-Française—was a *political* act, its impact surpassing by far that of any printed text, and it therefore took on a different communicative status and earned for itself a public reception commensurate with its political audacity.

Here is perhaps the most disturbing passage in the play. Jérémie has just rolled his scheme to conduct hot café-au-lait to every home in Argentina, and *Ézéchiel's* objection is that the milk will curdle in the tubes:

JÉRÉMIE: We'll charge more for it! Curdled milk, it's very good for your health. Would you like to underwrite the business? There are millions to be made!

ÉZÉCHIEL, *he puts his prayer shawl back on*: Go make them elsewhere. Leave me in peace, it's the hour of prayer (*He begins to recite a prayer in Hebrew.*) Baruch ata Adonai Elohénoù melech . . .

JÉRÉMIE, *taking candles out of his Levite coat*: Four candles that I bought from an Eskimo tribe!

ÉZÉCHIEL, *after sniffing them, returns the candles*: Melech aolam asher bachar banou . . .

JÉRÉMIE: Pure whale tallow!

ÉZÉCHIEL: Buying never interests me. One always pays too much. Bachar Banou micol aamim . . .

JÉRÉMIE, *enthusiastically handing over a ring*: A gold ring!

ÉZÉCHIEL, *after sniffing the ring, gives it back to Jérémie*: This ring is copper. Micol aamim venatan lanou eth torato torath . . .*

*JÉRÉMIE: Nous le vendrons plus cher! Le lait caillé, c'est très bon pour la santé. Voulez-vous commanditer l'affaire? Il y a des millions à gagner!

ÉZÉCHIEL, *Il remet son châle de prière*: Va les gagner ailleurs. Laisse-moi en paix, c'est l'heure de la prière. (*Il commence à réciter une prière en hébreu*) Baruch ata Adonai Elohénoù melech . . .

JÉRÉMIE, *sortant des chandelles de sa lévite*: Quatre chandelles que j'ai achetées à une tribu d'Esquimaux!

ÉZÉCHIEL, *après les avoir flairées, rend les chandelles*: Melech aolam asher bachar banou . . .

JÉRÉMIE: Pur suif de baleine!

ÉZÉCHIEL: L'achat ne m'intéresse jamais. On achète toujours trop cher. Bachar banou micol aamim . . .

JÉRÉMIE, *tendant avec enthousiasme une bague*: Une bague en or!

ÉZÉCHIEL, *après avoir flairé la bague, la restitue à Jérémie*: Cette bague est en cuivre. Micol aamim venatan lanou eth torato torath . . . (*Ézéchiel, 790*)

Imagine the reactions such a scene must have provoked! The “Dossier de presse,” included in the Pléiade edition of Cohen’s *Œuvres*, and other documents from the time allow us to partially reconstruct the reactions to *Ézéchiel*.⁴ For the sake of argument, I divide the audience into three very roughly delineated groups: republicans, anti-Semites, and *Israélites*.

Let us also stipulate a starting point: irrespective of his deep ambivalence about Judaism, Cohen, at least on a conscious level, surely saw this play as an open challenge to anti-Semitic discourse, ranging from *The Merchant of Venice* to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Drumont’s *La France juive*. In order to subvert that discourse by exhausting its rhetoric (the logic of self-derision), Cohen then turns the libel into a litany against anti-Semitism.⁵ This argument constitutes the most plausible “defense” of the play. (I assume here that *Ézéchiel* is not read and understood, as we have done above, as a function of the whole Solal-Cohen saga.)

Sympathetic democratically minded republican audiences, eager to bestow recognition on ghetto Jews, were consequently inclined to swallow *Ézéchiel* as an exotic, indigestible lump, untouched by the enzymes of thought. The most typical sympathetic reactions betray this acceptance without reflection: “*Ézéchiel* is a profound and savory study of the Jewish soul” (*Oeuvres*, 1321); “[in] this work . . . the Jewish soul is reflected, is totally synthesized” (1321); “a brilliant study of the Jewish soul” (1324). What do these platitudes mean? How can one assert that the “Jewish soul” is distilled in a forty-minute tragic farce involving a repulsive and blasphemous orthodox miser haggling with a delirious vagabond? Would anyone ever label a sordid dialogue about money and debt between Madame Bovary and her village merchant, Monsieur Lheureux, as a “savory study of the French soul”? If not, then a good question would be: What “French” plays correlate with *Ézéchiel*, that is, reflect “the French soul, . . . a total synthesis of it?” Sometimes, simple logic can go a long way in simplifying questions that seem impenetrable on the surface.

But the most bewildering instance of the sympathetic critics’ will not to know concerns the recurrent allusions to the “mysticism” of the play. I count seven such allusions in the Pléiade’s “Dossier de presse.” If anything, *Ézéchiel* himself is rudely opposed to mysticism of any kind. He represents himself as a strict legalist. As for Jérémie, he never makes any mystical illusions. He subscribes to the school of Hillel, which is more liberal in its interpretation of the Law, but betrays no hint of mysticism properly speaking. At best, if we put aside the fact that *Ézéchiel* is altogether blasphemous, the difference between *Ézéchiel* and Jérémie can be seen as a conflict between Sephardic legalistic elit-

ism and Ashkenazi populist orthodoxy. But nowhere are allusions to the “connection between God and creation, the existence of good and evil, and the path to spiritual perfection” or, on the more pragmatic level, to the “practice of deep meditation for the purpose of linking the soul with the Deity”—features common to all monotheistic mysticisms—to be found in Cohen’s play.⁶

“What shocks me in the first place is the continual passage from the profane to the sacred,” Cohen’s lifelong friend and admirer Vladimir Rabi wrote, in what is perhaps the most penetrating review of *Ézéchiel*.⁷ In other words, these juxtapositions of the sacred and the repulsive, which the sympathetic audience mistook as “mystical,” stand out as the most transgressive and grotesque aspects of the play: substituting a safe for the holy of holies (the golden calf for the Torah) and interspersing Hebrew liturgy with vile haggling. Would the same critics have recognized Christian mysticism in an Harpagon praying and bowing in front of a safe in lieu of a cross for the safety of his golden louis, while mixing Latin liturgy with particularly crass haggling?

It is necessary to examine the chain of displacements that allowed these reviewers to disregard Jérémié’s insightful assertion that “[Judaism] is not a religion but a catastrophe”—which would be the most obvious beginning of an interpretation—and assert instead that aesthetic “mysticism” constitutes the positive affirmation of the play. How and why does the grotesque become the sublime and mystical, and to what end? Answering these questions will go a long way in accounting for Cohen’s permanent marginality.

It is unlikely that any Gentile republican in the audience had actually had any real contact with traditional Jews such as *Ézéchiel* and Jérémié. These picturesque Jews were eccentric even for the assimilated French *Israélite*.⁸ Mysticism therefore becomes a solvent for irreducible differences: their ghettoized style of speech, exuberant body gestures, and ancient Hebrew are all markers of differences that cannot be assimilated by the republican ethos except as exotic curiosities. This displacement allows repression or forgetting of the actual questions the play poses. Instead of recognizing the “catastrophe of being a Jew,” these spectators recognize an affirmation of the mystical “soul of Judaism.” Acknowledging mystical exoticism, however, never represents a genuine recognition of historical realities in their full human dimension. It is rather the symptom of the will not to think, not to recognize. Better yet, in affirming that this play represents the soul of Judaism, when in fact it represents the catastrophe of Judaism, the critics unwittingly suggest that the soul of Judaism is catastrophic. Ironically, they end up reading the play correctly despite themselves.

For the typical French republican, the *Israélite* was the model (former) Jew. The credo of the *Israélite* was “Be a Jew on the inside, and a human being on the outside”—which is another version of the Josephic-Marrano paradigm writ large and legitimized by the Napoleonic offering of full citizenship to the Jewish community in exchange for its assimilation into French republican culture. (The Valorous, who are anything but *Israélite*, love Napoleon and talk incessantly and patriotically about France as a land of liberation and civilization.) The most important thing for an *Israélite* was to be invisible, to remain always indistinguishable from all other citizens while in public. Proust provides the most lucid description and analysis of the *Israélite*. This assimilation was *not* experienced by the Jewish community in France as an imposed and humiliating constraint. Alain Finkielkraut’s analysis of the state of mind of French Jewry during the period spanning from the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods through the Dreyfus Affair and up to Vichy is pertinent in understanding what happened in the Comedie-Française when *Ézéchiel* was performed: “[N]ever before has a nation granted full citizenship to the entire Jewish community, it was therefore not narrow interest [*calcul*], but gratitude that dictated the behavior of the descendants of Moses. To conform to the French people, they left behind all that could, in their laws, risk marking them as foreigners. . . . Far from feeling guilty, the Jews of that period experienced the sweet certitude of obeying the most elementary justice and morality: they acquitted their debt [to the Republic] by de-Judaizing themselves.”⁹ No conversion to Christianity was necessary; only a conversion to secular republicanism. The only condition for becoming a part of the French nation (*en être*, in Cohenian parlance) was to make one’s Jewishness visible only to one’s family and intimate circle. Kosher at home, T’aref at work, in sum. In general, the Jewish population embraced this legal emancipation with messianic fervor—they saw the French Revolution and Napoleon as the modern equivalents of the biblical exodus from Egypt, a new Passover.¹⁰ The *Israélite* in other words was a pseudo-Marrano with a clear conscience.

And no one is more fit to tell us this story than Albert Cohen. We have seen in Chapter 1 how the little Albert passionately constructed a religious altar to the French Republic and was in love with an imaginary playmate named Viviane. His romance with the French Republic came to an abrupt and violent end on his tenth birthday when the street hawker drove him from his *Israélite* paradise into the inferno of the “catastrophe called Judaism.” In the novel *Solal*, M. de Maussane tells his son-in-law, a Jewish Greek immigrant, what will secure his success in France: “If such is your desire, there is but one

possible attitude. No ambiguity. French and only French and everything that this implies. . . . I repeat . . . love your parents, but from afar, in God's name, from afar! Don't be upset, my friend, and let me tell you something just between the two of us: my great-grandmother, indeed yes, from Alsace. You see then that I have no prejudice. Besides, my best friends. But not so pure.”*

Throughout his life Albert Cohen attempted to straddle both positions—that of the Jew and that of the *Israélite*. Although publicly a Zionist and Jewish activist, he always remained a zealot of the *Israélite* dream to the point of recognizing the French language and culture as his true motherland.¹¹ Thus, he inverts the *Israélite* scheme: publicly, he is a Jewish nationalist, but in private, he remains an unconditional lover of France and would have preferred to become a member of the Académie française than to occupy any public position in Israel.¹² But all apparent inversions or conversions are simply just forms of an even more insistent repetition of the original scenario.

In a word, for the sympathetic republican spectator—and, by extension, for the *Israélite* sitting right beside him—traditional Judaism per se was aberrant, except, perhaps, as a form of fossilized exoticism. *Ézéchiel* and *Jérémie* must therefore be displaced into the excessive and “mystical” expression of the Jewish “soul” (as opposed to the sober and rational mind of the *Israélite*) so that they do not provoke repulsion even in liberal and assimilated minds as they do with the more vulgar militants of the Action française. This same dynamic would have been true of the less offensive *Fiddler on the Roof*; but Cohen considerably raises the stakes by offering a sacrilegious Shylock as the apologist for the Jewish community. Could there be a better illustration than the personage of *Ézéchiel* for those on the Right, Left, and Center of the political spectrum who, overtly or covertly, associated Judaism with a cosmopolitan, conspiratorial form of capitalism? The liberals had to smile and charitably displace this montage into a soft universal “mysticism” of Judaism. The *Israélites* (including Léon Blum, who was in the audience), on the other hand, were horrified by *Ézéchiel*, and their emphatic rejection of it would soon become a mantra in Jewish circles in Paris: “Under the pseudonym of Albert Cohen, Mr. Adolph Hitler had the shrewdness of presenting at the Comédie-Française a one-act play entitled *Ézéchiel*.”¹³

*“Si c'est là votre désir, il n'y a qu'une attitude possible. Pas d'ambiguïté. Français, uniquement français et tout ce que cela comporte. . . . Je le répète . . . aimez vos parents, mais de loin, au nom du ciel, de loin! Ne vous fâchez pas, mon ami, et laissez-moi vous dire une chose en toute confiance: mon arrière-grand-mère, oui parfaitement, d'Alsace. Vous voyez donc que je n'y mets aucun préjugé. Mes meilleurs amis, d'ailleurs. Mais pas si purs” (*Solal*, 275)

The anti-Semites, alerted by the fact that the national theater that Molière had built was going to be desecrated by a Cohen representing a Jewish subject, resorted to whistling and hissing to show their displeasure during the performance. You can imagine the clash that this sparked between the *Israélites*, who defended Cohen's right to present his play, despite their dislike of the content and tone; the enlightened republicans, who twisted uncomfortably in their seats, opening their liberal hearts to the "mysteries" and the "essences" of the Jewish "soul"; and the anti-Semites, who hated the very idea of the play but must have secretly rejoiced in its content and tone, if only for the final affirmation: "Now [that my son Solal is dead], I have only my money to love. My money, yes. Our money, our old ally, which is there (*he points toward the safe*) in this fortress, in our fortress. Our money has permitted us to remain a strong people, has permitted us to resist, to wait, to be patient, has permitted us to endure despite our persecutors, has permitted us to have contempt for their contempt."* No wonder Jacques Marteaux begins his review in the *Journal des débats*: "There was, yesterday afternoon at the Comédie-Française, what in the Middle Ages one called 'a big commotion [*hutin*],' a little revolution with hubub and brouhaha. *Ézéchiel* by Mr. Albert Cohen was what caused it."¹⁴

One can easily imagine the standard arguments offered for and against the play. But writing from the perspective of the year 2004, with easy access to Cohen's entire œuvre in the two handy volumes of the Pléiade edition, these arguments seem beside the point. None of the standard arguments about appropriateness of content and about the specificity of historical timing, none of the generic arguments about what Philip Roth calls Jewish self-censorship based on the fear of "what the goyim will think,"¹⁵ address the specificity of the Cohenian nightmare, that of Cohen's need to have Solal commit suicide rather than face his father, that of his further aggression in sending Jérémie as a buffoon surrogate for Solal. In the perspective of the whole œuvre, *Ézéchiel* is simply one in a series of macabre Purim plays about the "catastrophe of being a Jew." Solal's absence must have perplexed many a spectator at the Comédie-Française, especially given the fact that many in the audience, as is evident from the reviews, had read the novel *Solal*. The sadistic spectator desired to witness the cruel reunion between the orthodox Sephardic patriarch

*Maintenant, je n'ai plus que mon argent à aimer. Mon argent, oui. Notre argent, notre vieil allié qui est là (*il montre le coffre-fort*) dans cette forteresse, dans notre forteresse. Notre argent qui nous a permis de rester un peuple fort, qui nous a permis de résister, d'attendre, de patienter, qui nous a permis de durer malgré nos persécuteurs, qui nous a permis de mépriser leur mépris! (*Ézéchiel*, 799)

and his high-flying son, a privileged topos of Jewish literature since the Enlightenment. This is the very scene that Cohen offers the readers in *Solal*: after being spurned by Solal for weeks, Rabbi Gamaliel interrupts a diplomatic reception, and Solal, under pressure from his surrogate father, that is, his father-in-law, the liberal republican senator M. de Maussane, crosses himself in front of his father. In *Ézéchiel*, Cohen goes further. As the *Israélite* comes back to the Jew—he dies of his own will. An encounter with the father is no longer even imaginable.¹⁶ Solal's classic double bind leads him to suicide, as one of those gloomy Austro-German *Luftmenschen* described by Theodor Lessing and Sander Gilman in their respective books on Jewish self-hatred, and not as the charismatic, sun-loving Sephardic Messiah, the virile, biblical poet who sings the glory of Israel.¹⁷ But Cohen is both *Luftmensch* and *Solalic* (sun king) at once, or he represents both personae at once. Such is the pain that underwrites these books, and such is the pain that readers and spectators do all they can to avoid acknowledging when confronted with his work.

It is interesting to note that Cohen was so taken aback by the reception of his play, that, as his friend and biographer Gérard Valbert writes, he was to brood over the *Ézéchiel* fiasco many years after the actual events.¹⁸ There is, it seems, a permanent disconnect between Cohen's narrative drives and his readers. Cohen tells and retells the story of this "catastrophe of being a Jew," torn between abject origins and a suicidal destiny. But the novels are so baroque in their combination of style and rhetoric, in their interlacing of voices and perspectives that the repetitive montage, the raw material that he continuously re-gurgitates, may be overlooked, eclipsed, or even repressed by his readers.

A close examination of the enthusiastic and copious reception of *Belle du Seigneur* in 1968–70 only proves this point to a surprising degree. This reception is exemplary in terms of what is said and, more important, what is left unsaid. There are many excellent commentaries on the language, the eroticism, the social satire of bureaucracy in international organizations; there are also some vague allusions to "the Jewish gaze on the world," and, to account for Cohen's morbidity, the inevitable reference to the metaphysical theme of the "Vanity of Vanities," as if this phrase incarnated the quintessence of the Jewish spirit, which is completely wrong. But with the exception of a single sentence by Jean Blot, no mention is made of the crucial chapter about the Berlin underground and the dwarf Rachel, which is the linchpin of the plot. Many critics assert that it is a novel so vast and so complex, a modern *A Thousand and One Nights*, that it is about everything—and therefore really about nothing in particular. The submerged Josephic political plot, the obscure Es-

theric drama figuring Ariane as an androgynous projection of Solal—in other words, the essentials!—are completely ignored.¹⁹ What I suggested in the Prologue bears restatement: whereas Cohen's comedy and romance are universal, his tragedy is specifically Jewish in character. And most readers labor so as not to recognize this tragedy, not to recognize what is really at stake in this monumental novel, namely, the Shoah.

But the analogous oversight is not possible in *Ézéchiel*, due to the very nature of theater, the brevity of the play, and its monological, almost didactic tone. And if Cohen remained stunned by the reception of *Ézéchiel*, it is because he was always engrossed by his own need to write these macabre montages, and too little appreciated the impact of such a montage once presented on stage in a theater. Perhaps Cohen did not even care, being both naïve and narcissistic—driven by his need to tell his story in his way, come what may with the republicans, *Israélites*, and anti-Semites. But in doing so on stage he forced the public to reveal itself, to be both fascinated and phobic in reaction to his words, his private theater of nightmares. And thus all that is not said, or said obliquely between the lines, about his prose, comes to the fore here. Cohen forced the issue and was wounded. And this is why the study of *Ézéchiel* and its reception is invaluable for understanding Cohen's paradoxical status in our culture.

Ézéchiel therefore brings into the open the reasons for Cohen's marginality within the institutions invested with the transmission of culture, be they French, Israeli, or American, Jew or Gentile. Who would invest in promoting such a disruptive vision, in which every link to a symbolic identity is undermined? The answer is that Cohen is largely the property of enthusiastic readers worldwide. His masochistic and dissonant montages would preclude the possibility of an appropriation by any normative discourse within academia, including the discourses of demand for redress and the discourses of resentment. To fully account for this, one would have to carry out a full cultural psychoanalysis of France, the United States, and Israel. I conclude nevertheless with a few suggestive reflections on the dynamics of this resistance to Cohen's work.

The French angle is the most perplexing, but also the most obvious. From the early 1920s, key cultural figures such as Jacques Rivière, director of the *Nouvelle revue française* at the time, had recognized Cohen's literary potential and were extremely generous in terms of publishing venues and long-term financial support. As noted in the preface, Cohen's work is formally canonized in its entirety in the prestigious Bibliothèque de la Pléiade collection, and at-

tractive French paperback editions are readily available. This means that Cohen is read, even widely read, relative to other authors of his generation. Yet he remains, if not taboo, then at the margins of French official culture: he is rarely to be found in the national examination syllabi (*concours, textes au programme*), and is virtually untaught in graduate programs.²⁰

That Cohen is read by individuals but ignored by institutions should not surprise us. There are simply no grounds for his appropriation by or assimilation into the French collective conscious. Nothing in Cohen is amicable to a “republican” pedagogy or to the French historical memory. As late as the 1980s, one could have gone through a complete curriculum of French *belles lettres*—as I did—either in French or American universities, without once directly addressing the issue of Judaism in France. Pascal’s complex relationship to Judaism is glossed over quickly, when not altogether elided, and Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique*, a true manual of systematic modern anti-Judaism, is again carefully edited, if not in the text, then in assigned readings and topics of discussion. Proust might have given us the opportunity for just such a discussion, but even with *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the Jewish dimension, so crucial to understanding the novel, remains largely in the background, subsidiary to the Dreyfus Affair. In a literary culture largely based on careful selection, the Jew has been excerpted out. Either there is no such thing as a Jewish problem, since the *Israélite* is a well-adjusted citizen—end of discussion; or, more accurately, from a French point of view—even an enlightened, liberal vantage point—the Jew and the French are simply incompatible, unless the Jew erases himself completely, changing his name (like André Maurois), incarnating another destiny. Rather than present a multitude of arguments and proofs for this assertion—I submit the following extended passage by none other than André Gide:

It is absurd, it is even dangerous to attempt to deny the positive aspects of Jewish literature; but it is important to acknowledge that there is today in France a Jewish literature that is not French literature, that has its own virtues, its own meaning, and its own tendencies. What a wonderful job could be done and how helpful it could be to both the Jews and the French if someone would write a history of Jewish literature—a history that would not have to go back far in time, moreover, and within which I can see no disadvantage to fusing the history of Jewish literature from other countries, *for it is always one and the same thing*. This would clarify our ideas somewhat and would perhaps check certain hatreds that result from false classifications.

There is still much to be said on the subject. One would have to explain why, how and as a result of what economic and social factors the Jews have been silent up to the present. Why Jewish literature goes back hardly more than twenty years, fifty at most. Why during these last fifty years its development has followed a triumphant progress. Have they suddenly become more intelligent? No, before that they did not have the right to speak; perhaps, they did not even have the desire to, for it is worth noting that amidst all those [Jews] who now speak, there is not one who does so through an imperious need to speak—I mean whose eventual aim is the word in itself and the work, and not *the effect* of that word, its material and moral results. They speak louder than we because they do not have our reasons to speak often in an undertone, to respect certain things.²¹

This quotation should stand without comment, except to note the abyss separating Jews and Frenchmen, and to note how unrequited the love was that Jews felt for postrevolutionary France. This quotation expels all the Cohens as Cohens from the “true” French literature, in the same manner that the street hawker expelled the little Albert from the fraternity of citizens.²²

No wonder the Gides of the world had to displace the aggressive and uncouth *Ézéchiél* into exotic mysticism—and charitably left the foreign play at that. In perhaps an unconscious urge to legitimate Cohen’s work, French academic critics now tend to position him within the sphere of French *lettres*, and, for the most part, their arguments are reasonable. In doing so, the critics followed in the footsteps of Albert Cohen himself, who in a slew of mostly regrettable interviews following the publication and celebrity of *Belle du Seigneur*, succumbed to the narcissistic fantasy of cultivating his literary legend by asserting that he was not a writer, but rather a “Don Juan,” and tacitly assented to trivial readings of his fiction that ignore the tragic main plot.²³ No doubt, Cohen is inspired by Stendhal, obsessed by Proust, fascinated by Don Juan, and so on. However, if my reading of Cohen is correct, the essential plot lies elsewhere—and this elsewhere is what blocks his institutional transmission.

This “elsewhere,” which *Ézéchiél* gives us in protean form, is the following: Cohen’s narratives of dissonance and self-mutilation, combining the affirmation of Judaism in the abstract and its negation in the concrete, combining the desire to be French at all cost with the lucidity of knowing that no Jew could ever become fully French, combining the will to belong (*en être*), with suicidal resignation (which is the result of the realization that such a desire to belong will never be fully reciprocated)—this narrative that conjugates to no end and without allegories the “catastrophe of being a Jew” in the specific circum-

stances of the interwar period in France is just too inimical to French institutional ideology. Once they are closely studied, Cohen's narratives could never become institutional tools in the transmission of French culture, such as *textes au programme* in various centralized state examinations.²⁴

But could this masochistic excavation of the "catastrophe of being a (French) Jew" become even today a part of the self-representation of French institutions without, for example, the alibis of a talmudic ethical thought recast in the language of phenomenology with the purpose of a further deepening of the liberal Republic? (Emmanuel Lévinas).²⁵ I doubt it. This irredeemable lament about the "catastrophe of being a Jew" and the correlated suicidal quest would have no place in a polity predicated on the disappearance of just such irreducible differences, even though few Jews today subscribe to the *Israélite* delusion. Unable to tame the texts, the institutions remain de facto phobic to Cohen, who insistently confronts them with their irredeemable failure to nullify centuries of anti-Semitism through political revolutions and their related "enlightened cultures."

The resistance to Cohen in Israel is even more total. His works have been translated into Hebrew, yet they have been largely ignored there, with the modest exception of *Le Livre de ma mère*.²⁶ Although considered by many to be the preeminent Sephardic author of the twentieth century, he is not part of the literary conversation in Israel.²⁷ A. B. Yehoshua, for example, one of Israel's most preeminent novelists, and a Sephardi, never mentions Cohen, even though Yehoshua's magnum opus *Mr. Mani* is itself the morbid story of successive insanities and deferred suicides over five generations.²⁸ What would the Sephardim do with Cohen, who combines the cultural and existential psychosis of a converted Austrian Jew with a clownish Mediterranean exuberance, the whole montage unanchored in faith, family, and community—and, above all, lacking political hope of any kind? Who in Israel would invest in the transmission of Cohen's bleak version of the Jewish catastrophe? Who in Israel, where the staging of the *Merchant of Venice* was taboo until very recently, would even think of putting *Ézéchiël* on stage? The answer is obvious. Notwithstanding his distinguished Zionist cultural and diplomatic career, Cohen is simply not readable in Israel—at least at present.

To read Albert Cohen for what is properly his, to surmount the profound resistance to him, we must first overcome the historical stage in which Jewish writers and intellectuals live their Judaism as a permanent catastrophe—a catastrophe that is rarely openly admitted and is experienced chiefly as a set of symptoms—and start constructing a reflective relationship, self-conscious and

perhaps altogether ironical, with this masochism-as-identity, with this montage that Daniel Sibony correctly characterizes as “the sado-masochistic relationship of everything-for-the-other,” which is inherently self-destructive and ultimately suicidal.²⁹ Philip Roth’s recent American Trilogy is well along on this road, while regrettably—in my opinion—the Levinasian and Derridian turn toward ethics and “nonlogocentric justice” only exacerbates the moral masochism inherent in catastrophic Judaism, in which the Jew shoulders every ill and all the guilt of the world—the perfect Cohenian Christlike suicidal montage, all over again.³⁰

Within the American academy a more positive tectonic shift has already begun with the illuminating contributions of, among others, Arthur Hertzberg, Jeffery Mehlman, and Alice Kaplan, which are all, to a certain degree, exercises in self-conscious balancing of the attraction to and repulsion of Jews from French culture. Their work is free of willful French republican forgetfulness and in tune with Jewish concerns that are at least more lucid about the *Israélite* double bind—all while remaining sympathetic or even in love with France, as was the ten-year-old Albert Cohen—allowing for more reflective readings of authors such as Voltaire, Maurice Blanchot, and Céline.³¹ Overcoming the abjectness of the other is certainly easier than overcoming the abjectness of the same—but is it not time that we also create a space for reading Albert Cohen?

Perhaps the United States of America, free of the feudal and fundamentally anti-Semitic heritages of France and Europe, and their corrective republics, revolutions, and counterrevolutions, and equally free of an exclusive investment in a nationalist solution for the Jewish people, will host this historical transformation of Jews into actors in postcatastrophic Judaism, and thus also become receptive to a frank reading of Albert Cohen. One has to get past the catastrophe to take full measure of the catastrophe’s colossal scope, including its brilliant literary epiphanies. This book is intended as a contribution to this budding conversation.

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